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BLACKNESS: An analysis of Gwendolyn Brook's poem *Primer for Blacks*

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INTRODUCTION

Inequality, racism, segregation, all of these mixed up has contributed to build what ended up known as Black literature in America. It has not always been assumed as part of American literary canons. Despite of that, black people represent, basically, one of the biggest community all over America since colonization as so we can say that Afro-Americans intrinsically represent the result of America historical formation.

This essay will deal with some sociocultural and historical aspects of Afro-American people portrayed in American black writer Gwendolyn Brook's poem *Primer for Blacks* in which she depicts most Afro-American's attitude towards their own culture and race. Our objective is to find and discuss about some elements of intra racial colorism (WILLIAMS, 2002), which is one of the themes explored by Brooks in her poetry throughout the poem.

We are going to start our work with a brief biography of the author in order to contextualize our analysis of the poem. Finally, we shall conclude our discussion by giving our last considerations about the feelings, discoveries, expectations we had along the reading and analysis of the poem.

A brief biography of Gwendolyn Brooks

On June 7, 1917, a black girl, whose future career as a writer would be so prominent to 20th century American literature, was born was born in Topeka, Kansas. Elizabeth Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000) was the first child of David Anderson Brooks and Keziah Wims. Her family moved to Chicago when she was in the age of was six. Chicago became her hometown where she grow up as a quite talented writer.

During a period of strong racial segregation in the US, Gwendolyn Brooks She attended the white Hyde Park High School where the girl experienced all types of racism and intolerance while attending classes there. Because of that, she was later on, transferred to the all-black Wendell Philips High and further, to the integrated Englewood High School. By the age of thirteen, she attended Wilson Junior College

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from which she graduated in 1936. By that time, she published her first poem: "Eventide" in the magazine *American Childhood*.

In 1945, she published her first book of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), which made big success. In 1949, she was the first African American who won the Pulitzer Prize with her collection of poems in *Annie Allen* (1949). During the late 60's and early-mid 70's, she nurtured her activism and interest in favour of black literature. Then, she decided to publish *Riot* (1969), *Family Pictures* (1970), *Aloneness* (1971), *Aurora* (1972), and *Beckonings* (1975). These works among others of her promoted her ideals by "deal[ing] with political subjects and figures, such as South African activist Winnie Mandela, the onetime wife of antiapartheid leader—and later president of the country—Nelson Mandela."²

After a prolific literary career and activism on black participation in American literature, Gwendolyn Brooks died of cancer when she was 83 years old on December 3, 2000.

However, some couples of years before her death she had written one of the her most beautiful poems: *Primer for Blacks* (1980), in which she intended to convince African Americans they are to be proud of their skin colour and their culture. Therefore, there would be no reason for them to be ashamed of who they are. Here it follows Gwendolyn Brooks' *Primer for Blacks*³:

*Blackness
is a title,
is a preoccupation,
is a commitment Blacks
are to comprehend—
and in which you are
to perceive your Glory.*

*The conscious shout
of all that is white is
'It's Great to be white.'
The conscious shout
of the slack in Black is
'It's Great to be white.'
Thus all that is white
has white strength and yours.*

² POETRY FOUNDATION. *Gwendolyn Brooks n Brooks*. Available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gwendolyn-brooks>. Access on Nov. 12, 2019. _____ .

³ _____. *Primer for Blacks* by Gwendolyn Brooks. Available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51838/primer-for-blacks>. Access Nov. 12, 2019.

*The word Black
 has geographic power,
 pulls everybody in:
 Blacks here—
 Blacks there—
 Blacks wherever they may be.
 And remember, you Blacks, what they
 told you—
 remember your Education:
 “one Drop—one Drop
 maketh a brand new Black.”
 Oh mighty Drop.
 _____And because they have given us
 kindly
 so many more of our people*

*Blackness
 stretches over the land.
 Blackness—
 the Black of it,
 the rust-red of it,
 the milk and cream of it,
 the tan and yellow-tan of it,
 the deep-brown middle-brown high-
 brown of it,
 the “olive” and ochre of it—
 Blackness
 marches on.*

*The huge, the pungent object of our
 prime out-ride*

*is to Comprehend,
 to salute and to Love the fact that we
 are Black,
 which is our “ultimate Reality,”
 which is the lone ground
 from which our meaningful
 metamorphosis,
 from which our prosperous staccato,
 group or individual, can rise.*

*Self-shriveled Blacks.
 Begin with gaunt and marvelous
 concession:
 YOU are our costume and our
 fundamental bone.*

*All of you—
 you COLORED ones,
 you NEGRO ones,
 those of you who proudly cry
 “I’m half INDIan”—
 those of you who proudly screech
 “I’VE got the blood of George
 WASHINGTON in MY veins”
 ALL of you—
 you proper Blacks,
 you half-Blacks,
 you wish-I-weren’t Blacks,
 Niggeroes and Niggerenes.*

You.

Analysis of the poem

One can see that the speaker conveys a sense of nonconformism along the poem; she seems to claim in favor of socio-political and identitarian fight for changes. The title “Primer for Blacks”, suggests the idea of instruction, guidance, perhaps, foundation. The word primer itself may mean a type of basic handbook, manual or method used to introduce any subject. Taking into consideration this idea of “foundation”, it brings out a sense of teaching Afro-Americans they should understand they are supposed to make a whole unity, a real identity ; all that in a common agreement that all of them are blacks, no matter they are lighter or darker colored. Being so,

The title, “Primer for Blacks” relates to the content of the poem because it proclaims the importance of a fundamental love for ones own race as a

primer while simultaneously combating those who participate in same race discrimination. This fundamental love as a primer is meant in the sense of teaching an African American during childhood a love and appreciation for themselves and their own race. Walker (n.d.)

In declaiming, "*Blackness is a title / is a preoccupation / is a commitment Blacks / are to comprehend*", it seems that the poet seeks to represent her conviction of fighting for the recognition of black identity and the construction of an egalitarian society. The construction of this strong image of a race in the poem seems to show her desire of greater representation of the identity of an entire community. The African-American community, united by the sense of pride of its race, its origins, its culture, its black identity.

The choice of words like "*title*" and "*commitment*" itself provokes an idea of calling, proclamation; need of reformation, need of building the foundations of this ideal and goal to be achieved. In the last verse of the first stanza, she says, "*to perceive your glory*". From this perspective, we can understand a little the dimension of the ideological battle by which the speaker proposes to get into in order to make it explicit her strong desire to show her pride of her identity as a Black woman in a segregated and racist society.

It seems that the speaker makes it clear that the ideological power, which justifies racist feelings and the prevalence of white hegemony, is the result of the lack of awareness of the black community itself. It is a lack of respect and pride with their own identity: "*The conscious shout / of the slack in Black is / 'It's Great to be white'*". It shows a proof of her accusation of the inertia and conformism of Afro-American community regarding the construction of white hegemony, for they themselves seem to let their own identity become inferior by exalting the elements of white culture and identity as if it were superior to those of their own race. Williams (2002, p. 5) says that in Brooks' work "Human beings in general, and blacks in particular must become the 'authors of their new ideas' and engage seriously the question of their identities".

In the third stanza, we can feel that the speaker reveals self-awareness of how their colour defines them within the society in which they live. In declaiming "*The word Black / has geographic power*", we realize that she makes a criticism on the racial manner of labelling people 'Black' as if this fact meant they do not belong to America itself; as if this meant Afro-American were not part of the construction of American society. We also realize that the constant use of capital letters in 'Blacks' demonstrates her emphasis on making it clear that she is proud of saying she is an African-American

and that those ones to whom she refers those words in her poem should be proud of their identity as a black too.

Although Afro-American most likely denied or were ashamed of their colour, she call their attention by saying "*And remember, you Blacks, what they told you/ 'one Drop—one Drop / maketh a brand new Black'*", referring to racist white behaviour towards all African-American. The poet sarcastically seems to try to touch their wound, for they think they would be superior in some way because they claim to be "*Half INDIans*" or descendants of whites. Williams (2002) affirms that

Color, thus, functions as a symbolic quest for wholeness throughout Brooks's body of work. The historical referent and metaphor of color translates into a communal journey in which African Americans search for the sources of their self-hatred and resolve the tension of their existence. Brooks's text of color proposes a collective vision for African Americans and reclaims the humanity of people defined as Other (WILLIAMS, 2002, p. 6).

Other interesting point here is that even the capitalization of the letters W-A-S-H in "*have got blood of George WASHington*" makes the word WASH suggesting her criticism to the Afro-Americans' acceptance of hegemonic white ideology of BLACK as being metaphorically related to 'dirtiness', 'impurity', 'wrongness': things that are supposed to be banned, cleaned, "WASHED".

We also may analyse the connotation of the word "drop" in "*one Drop—one Drop / maketh a brand new Black.*" / *Oh mighty Drop*. Here we will realize that she makes a purposeful use of the polysemy of the word to provoke an irony effect. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, some of the means the word drop convey is either to 'fall' or even 'decline in quality'. Thus, it may have been used to mean metaphorically the act of falling of hegemonic white civilization, representing a symbolic fall of the white man's power in mixing with black people, thus originating Afro-Americans, thus constituting a nation of mixed colours, cultures and identities. By saying this, the speaker seems to cast them in the face that they are nothing but "a drop" to white people; a 'mistake' that gave rise to all the miscegenation in America. She makes it clear that only when they realize they need to value their identity as Black – "*Oh mighty Drop*" – they will achieve the same rights as their racist oppressors.

The poet makes a beautiful frame of the various types of skin colours in the fourth stanza that makes up the African-American race:

*Blackness
stretches over the land.
Blackness—
the Black of it,
the rust-red of it,*

*the milk and cream of it,
the tan and yellow-tan of it,
the deep-brown middle-brown high-brown of it,
the "olive" and ochre of it—
Blackness
marches on.*

She proudly refers to all of them as Blacks; as members of a social and political identity that needs to fight for their space in a fair society; an identity that fights for diversity and equal rights for everybody regardless their skin colour.

According to Williams (2002), there is a constant use of terms such as "*rust-red*"; "*yellow-tan*"; "*deep-brown, middle-brown, high-brown*"; "*high-yellows*," "*low-yellows*," "*bright*"; "*caramel*" "*cream-colored*," "*cream-yellows*," "*bronzy*," "*dusk*"; "*sweet and chocolates*"; "*unembroidered browns*"; "*cocoa straights*" in Brooks poetry. Besides, most of the times, those terms related to darker skins colors would be used to identify those things or individuals with less qualities or good attributes than those of lighter colors. It seems she made use of that feature as a way of criticism on how Afro-Americans themselves seemed to be prejudiced against their own race and despise the elements of their culture and identity.

By the other hand, by using aggressive language, sometimes full of pejorative terms and expressions: "COLORED" and "NEGRO", the speaker seeks to draw the attention of all Afro-Americans who feel ashamed of their colour, their identities, and their origins. In the last stanza, the speaker shows her strong feeling of disgust for Afro-American denying of their identity by saying:

*ALL of you—
you proper Blacks,
you half-Blacks,
you wish-I-weren't Blacks,
Niggeroes and Niggerenes.*

We see that the poet constantly highlights the need of creating a black awareness among all Afro-American people. She exalts the establishment of a pride of being black "*which is our "ultimate Reality," / which is the lone ground / from which our meaningful metamorphosis, / from which our prosperous staccato / group or individual, can rise.*" (fifth stanza)

The speaker makes a call for all Afro-Americans to be ashamed not of being Afro-American but rather for being blind for not realize that while they do not change their racist conceptions and prejudice against their own identity nothing will change for better.

CONCLUSION

While segregation and racial oppression of whites against blacks in twentieth century US seemed to advance day by day, Gwendolyn Brooks were able to see one of the deepest and worst form of prejudice, segregation and racism: She clearly depicted Afro-American discrimination against themselves.

We could see that *Primer for Blacks* explores the theme of same race discrimination in an attempt to create in a way a sense of Afro-American awareness of their race and skin colour. By reading the poem, we can feel this poem heartily seeks to pass a message of combating discrimination, especially that one against one's own race. This poem seems to elicit the long journey African Americans have had to conquer space in a segregated and racist society.

Thus, we could see that the issue of "color resounds as a recurring theme in Brooks' delineation of the human condition because it is the life text of her personal ambivalence to blackness" (WILLIAMS, 2002).

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